



Be Ignited, or Be Gone

Sunday, August 14, 2022
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Jay Sanderford

Luke 12:49-56
Isaiah 5:1-7

In spring for each of the past eight years, I've planted a vegetable garden in Dexter. It's located on a friend's farm on a small plot of ground that we prepared, tilled, fenced and tilled again in preparation for a summer harvest of sugar snap peas, lettuce, chard, potatoes, onions, squash, melons, pumpkins, corn and tomatoes. Our Washtenaw County gray marl clay is dense, compacts easily into sizable clods, and quite unforgiving. We add as much natural organic material as possible; composted manure, leaf mulch and chicken litter, and we till again. Success is unpredictable. The deer, groundhogs and raccoons are tireless, though the fence helps keep them at bay. The rabbits are cute but irrepressible. We plant an extra share so they get their portion.

As a gardener, I know full well that planting anything, even hope, is risky. I'm well aware that despite our very best efforts, what we hoped to plant may fail. Two years ago, the rabbits decimated the green beans. In defiance I kept replanting. Eventually I harvested three quarts of delicious, fresh bush beans. By contrast, on Wednesday of this week I picked more than 15 gallons of beans for Food Gatherers, more than 30 pounds of fresh produce. Last year we enjoyed abundant crops of red potatoes and beets; this year neither one even sprouted.

Even God has the experience of planting something only to watch it fail as Isaiah's story about a vineyard confirms. Still, to risk hope is more than a failed attempt. To plant in hope of a fruitful future is already a sign of fulfillment.

Once, I was teaching an adult class on Isaiah and we reached chapter Isaiah 40: "*Every valley shall be exalted.*" A student piped up, "So Isaiah borrowed these words from Handel?" He was reading the Old Testament in the light of his "new" experience. In reading Isaiah I find it hard not to read the Old Testament in the light of the new—the New Testament, that is. Such a re-reading is appropriate as long as we first allow the Old Testament to speak for itself.

And Isaiah does speak here. This fifth chapter is the urgent cry of one who is heart-broken over the sad state of well, a special vineyard on one level, and a cherished nation on another plane. Jerusalem is

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God's prized possession in the eyes of the prophet, and yet the residents who live in the Holy City are not the caretakers God desires. Because of them, the vineyard, the city, does not produce the fruits of justice and righteousness God intended. With this massive failure of heart, God intends to bring destruction to the city and to reorder the priorities of the people.

Yet, this is also a love song, which Isaiah sings to Judah and Jerusalem on behalf of the God they have rejected. I think of it as if the prophet had been best man at the wedding. Now, at a point of crisis in the relationship, the prophet acts as a third party—reminding the bride of the height and depth of God's fervent love. Until God can keep silence no longer, crying out in verse 3. This wounded lover is not proud: "*What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done?*" (Is. 5:3).

In this dramatic shift, the voice changes, and God insists that the people of Jerusalem and Judah stand in judgment as the unproductive vineyard. Like others, I see parallels between vineyards, gardens and churches. We're never sure exactly the coming days will hold, but the future holds possibilities we can only imagine. Small plots filled with good soil, a few seeds or vines, good weather and just a little water. A good stout hoe to keep the weeds at bay. Will these seeds, the young vines, grow deep and strong? Will the people—children, young people, students and adults – find nourishment enough that their hopes and dreams for a life-giving faith and community might find full expression in a life together? To plant anything is a risk. There are no guarantees that it will become strong and fruitful. So, we nurture the ground, and wait to see what may come. And we pray.

During this season of rancorous division in church, politics and society, this passage from Luke 12 in which Jesus in neither safe nor tame seems to affirm exactly the wrong actions and attitudes. It also seems to miss the mark for a gospel that begins with an angelic promise of "peace" on earth (Luke 2:14). But the shadow of division has always been present in Luke, even in those early nativity stories we read in Advent. Mary's Magnificat divides the powerful from the lowly (Luke 1:46-56), pointing to God's sorting of power and privilege as a sign of faithfulness. Simeon describes Jesus as a sign that will be "*spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed*" (Luke 2:34-35).

The child is a sign that will puncture even Mary's soul. Scholar Raymond Brown suggests that, in Luke, this piercing does not refer to the pain of her son's death. Instead, it points to the criticism that Mary will experience in trying to live faithfully. Jesus will be a sign that divides one's motives and inclinations like a sword, inviting probing spiritual discernment for everyone, including his mother. When Mary and Jesus' brothers are spurned by Jesus' redefinition of family as "*those who hear the word of God and do it*" (Luke 8:19-21), the cost of this discernment becomes plain. Even the hallowed category of "family" is rearranged in light of God's larger priorities.

So Luke 12, for all its provocation, should not come as a blow. Jesus' own family has been torn by the division of God's announcement. And Luke's readers, living in a time of persecution and oppression,

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would have recognized that there is a cost to following Christ. The Prince of Peace places them at odds with the government, the Pax Romana—which divides them from family members who would prefer to “keep the peace” with the powers that be. Within both the story and the how the story was received, peace has always meant more than getting along.

The challenge is that the incendiary language of this passage that can be used for all sorts of self-justification and aggressive attacks of every imaginable type. Fiery baptisms have been used to approve war and brutality. Jesus’ description of family division has been co-opted to rationalize breaking apart immigrant families, church fights and excommunications that deny the spirit of love and the ethics of Jesus’ community. Politicians and pundits borrow this combustible language of division and load it with exaggeration and disgust for pure political gain. There is division that serves the gospel of peace, and there is division born of stubborn pride. How does one discern the difference?

It’s important to remember that when Jesus speaks of division rather than peace in Luke’s Gospel, he’s being descriptive, not prescriptive. It’s not Jesus’s desire or purpose to set fathers against sons or mothers against daughters. It’s certainly not his purpose that we stir up conflict for conflict’s sake, or use his words to justify violence or war. But his words are a necessary reminder that the peace Jesus offers us is not the counterfeit peace of denial, dishonesty, and harmful accommodation. His is a holistic, truth-telling, disinfecting peace. The kind of deep, life-changing peace that doesn’t hesitate to break in order to mend, and cut in order to heal.

Jesus’ call to “*interpret the present time*” (Luke 12:56) is critical. How does the fire of Jesus’ teaching and the piercing of his word reveal the hearts of the church today? Jesus will name realities we don’t want named. He will upset hierarchies we’d rather keep intact. He will expose the lies we tell ourselves out of cowardice or laziness. And he will disrupt dynamics in our relationships with ourselves and with each other that keep us from wholeness and holiness. This is not because Jesus wants us to suffer. It’s because he knows that real peace is worth fighting for. Consider the fact that Jesus forced choices from just about everyone he met during his years of incarnate ministry. No one met him without feeling compelled to change. He consistently brought people to the point of crisis or transformation. He consistently led people to decisions their families and communities didn’t understand. Jesus himself was

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considered foolish by his mother and siblings. Still, the status quo held no sway over him; his project was peace, justice and mercy. Or bust. And so I have to ask myself: when was the last time my faith “divided” me? When was the last time I allowed Jesus to bring me to a point of saving crisis? When was the last time my faith life encouraged holy division, holy change, in someone else’s heart? In other words: what am I most invested in? My comfort or my salvation?

Fire is an ambivalent image in scripture. There are burning bushes of revelation (Exodus 3:2) and fiery conflagrations of sin (Genesis 19:24). It is ambivalent in the present day, as well. Catastrophic wildfires, exacerbated by rising temperatures and drought, bring devastation. But wildfires can also lead to new life, creating the conditions for habitat diversity and helping plants adapt to novel climates. The fire Jesus describes is costly, but it serves the purpose of life and love.

It does not, however, serve the purposes of comfort. Jesus’ fire is not like the fire of a hearth, safely controlled for the pleasures of a household. In the words of Mary Oliver’s *“What I Have Learned So Far,”* this is not the light that leads to “indolence,” to laziness and inaction. It is light that leads in the opposite direction to “action.” This fire of love burns away our obsession with self-preservation, our worship of family, and our false sense of control. It is a fire that marks us all with the ashes of a deep and holy peace of compassion and kindness. It is a fire that, like Simeon’s piercing prophecy to Mary, tests the heart—revealing the thoughts of many and calling for a baptism of commitment. Oliver minces no words: *“Be ignited, or be gone.”*

*Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I
not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,
looking into the shining world? Because, properly
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.
Can one be passionate about the just, the
ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit
to no labor in its cause? I don’t think so.
All summations have a beginning, all effect has a
story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.
Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of
light is the crossroads of— indolence, or action.
Be ignited, or be gone.*

- Mary Oliver

Friends, may the fire of the Holy God, lead you through every wilderness and challenge that you face, going before you as a pillar of light in the darkness. May the voice of our good God come to you clearly from bush that burns brightly but is not burned up. May tongues of passionate flame leap up when you are speaking about the mystery and miracle of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. May the holy fire of God’s great love warm a sacred meal for all those you love.